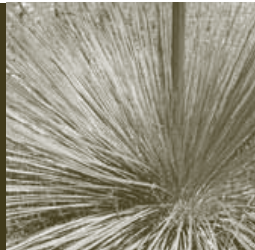


1 Director's review



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The year in review

This year has been another busy and challenging one for the agency and our staff. We are making considerable progress on many fronts, with important successes in systematically reducing risks and threats to park values. Our capacity to meet our challenges relies on skilled, able and dedicated staff. Continuing to invest in building and extending our staff is one of our highest priorities. While resources often limit our capacity to deliver all the results we aim for, we are proud to be protecting and presenting an important set of Australia's most remarkable and special places.

During 2005–06 the Australian Government gave strong support and additional resources to a number of protected area initiatives. The Minister for the Environment and Heritage, Senator the Hon Ian Campbell, announced 13 new marine protected areas. The Senate initiated an inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas, due to report in November 2006.



Donald Fraser, Chair of the Uluru–Kata Tjuta National Park Board of Management, with his grandson George at the proposed site for the new viewing area and visitor infrastructure

The Hon Greg Hunt MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage, in May 2006, announced additional funding for Kakadu and Uluru. The funding includes a capital injection of \$5.45 million to begin the development of a major new visitor node at Uluru–Kata Tjuta National Park—the largest development in the park since the cultural centre in 1995. The 'sunrise project' will create a new viewing area to the south-east of Uluru, at

a site chosen by the park's traditional owners. This world class facility will provide an all-day experience for visitors, with panoramic views of both Uluru and Kata Tjuta, and new Indigenous business opportunities to enhance the park's World Heritage values. The development will accommodate a potential doubling in visitor numbers and eventually replace the current congested sunrise viewing area.

Kakadu National Park received an additional \$1.77 million to implement priority recommendations of the Morse Report, which accompanied the development of the

Shared Tourism Vision for Kakadu. This funding is facilitating the re-branding and promotion of Kakadu, in cooperation with Tourism NT. A number of new Indigenous tourism businesses commenced in the park during the year. Some of the new funds will assist these businesses with start-up costs.

A further \$7.3 million, over four years, will fund the rehabilitation of uranium mining sites dating back to the 1950s and 60s in the south of Kakadu National Park. Resolution of an outstanding legal case with the Coronation Hill Joint Venturers is enabling the incorporation of 29 old mining leases, including Guratba (Coronation Hill) into Kakadu.

The announcement of a regional network of marine protected areas in the South-east Marine Region will add an estimated 22 million hectares to Australia's marine protected area estate. The formal proclamation of these new reserves is expected in late 2006.

Parks Australia is placing a greater focus on the implications of climate change for protected areas, responding to growing concerns about forecast changes in temperature, rainfall, fire risk, and sea levels. With the support of the Australian Greenhouse Office, we have commissioned a consultancy to assess potential climate change impacts on Commonwealth reserves. The consultancy will help us develop appropriate planning and adaptation measures to add to those already specified in park management plans.

Pressure from fishing vessels, including traditional fishing allowed by the Memorandum of Understanding with Indonesia, continues to pose a significant management challenge at the Ashmore Reef National Nature Reserve. The Government is considering how best to address this issue.

The Government's assessment of statutory authorities against the templates developed by the Uhrig review included consideration of the status of the Director of National Parks as a statutory corporation. At the time of writing, this was yet to be finalised. There is therefore some uncertainty about the future of the corporation, which is expected to be resolved in late 2006.

Natural heritage management

The year saw some significant initiatives and successes. Many of our successes were achieved in partnership with neighbours, state and territory parks agencies, research institutions and volunteers. However, our overall success in containing high priority weed and feral animal species is not yet adequate to feel confident about the long-term outlook for the conservation of park values.





A small population of the endangered rufous hare-wallaby (mala) was released into a predator free enclosure in Uluru–Kata Tjuta National Park in late 2005. This species has great cultural significance to local Indigenous people—mala stories are closely associated with Uluru. A ceremony to celebrate the re-establishment of mala in the park was an emotional event for the participating senior traditional owners. The Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Service donated the mala from their captive population at Wattarka, and their staff provided valuable technical assistance and support for the Uluru project. Six months after release, females have pouch young and new juveniles have been sighted.

At Booderee National Park, excellent predator control, primarily of foxes, may have contributed to the first record in more than 25 years of the rare white-footed dunnart, a small marsupial. Professor David Lindenmayer of the Australian National University, supported by the Australian Research Council and Booderee staff, is leading a comprehensive five-year study of the park's plants and animals and the effects of fire. Early results show long-nosed bandicoots and eastern bristlebirds—two important species at Booderee—appear to have recovered unexpectedly well after a major bushfire in 2003. A separate study of the park's marine biodiversity recorded the highest fish species richness for temperate Australia at two sites off Bowen Island.

Other major biological monitoring programmes—at Christmas Island, Pulu Keeling, Kakadu, Uluru and the marine protected areas—are greatly increasing our knowledge of the plants and animals that we protect. In some cases the news is good. For example more individuals and populations of several rare plant species have been located in Kakadu, the conservation status of the Abbott's booby on Christmas Island has improved, tjakura numbers at Uluru continue to increase, and sea-bird populations and coral reefs are generally in good shape. Other studies and surveys highlight significant areas of concern. Yellow crazy ants continue to harm many species on Christmas Island and cane toads are affecting populations of northern quolls and a range of reptile species in Kakadu. Kakadu is confronting increasing incursions by a range of pasture grasses and a major outbreak of salvinia in Yellow Water, and Norfolk Island has discovered new introduced species, such as the Asian house gecko and Argentine ant.

A new marine protected area is proposed over the Cod Grounds off the east coast of New South Wales, to protect significant habitat for the critically endangered eastern grey nurse shark. It is expected that this marine protected area will be declared after finalisation of structural assistance arrangements associated with the local cessation of commercial fishing.

Cultural heritage management

Guratba (Coronation Hill), located in the south of Kakadu, is one of the most important sacred sites in Northern Australia. Its rehabilitation, as part of the project to rehabilitate old uranium mine leases, will mark the end of a long and controversial chapter in the history of mining in Australia. A ceremony was held in early 2006 at the Mary River Ranger Station to posthumously commemorate the three senior traditional owners who fought hard to protect this country. These Indigenous leaders were instrumental in the decision to stop further mining at Coronation Hill, and in securing Aboriginal freehold title to their ancestral lands, which are incorporated into Kakadu National Park.

The new Cultural Sites Management System at Uluru–Kata Tjuta National Park has been developed by *Anangu* (western desert Aboriginal) rangers and was launched in October 2005. It includes digital imagery of all cultural sites and associated rock art around Uluru. These are regularly monitored and maintained by *Anangu* staff.


The collection of oral histories from traditional owners continues at Uluru and Kakadu. A partnership agreement with the National Archives of Australia is being developed to ensure the proper long-term storage and protection of irreplaceable audio and video materials.

To ensure that commercial interests understand *Anangu* sensitivities about portrayal of images of Uluru and Kata Tjuta, and to streamline the regulatory procedures for obtaining permits, the guidelines for film, photography and artwork in the park were reviewed, simplified and reissued in July 2005. To accompany the guidelines, the traditional owners helped produce a DVD which assists media representatives to understand the natural and cultural context of the park, and appropriate behaviour when working with *Anangu*. The DVD, produced with the support of Tourism NT and Tourism Australia, is available in five languages.

Joint management

Booderee National Park, Wreck Bay Aboriginal Community Council and Wreck Bay Enterprises Ltd (WBEL) have together developed an integrated training strategy. The Booderee training manager coordinates the training effort, with delivery to park staff, community members and WBEL staff to strengthen confidence, skills and knowledge across all three organisations. WBEL delivers park management services under service level agreements for entry station management, road and fire trail maintenance, and campground cleaning. These services were delivered to agreed standards in 2005–06. Costs were benchmarked by an external auditor and verified that the park is obtaining value for money. WBEL also successfully undertook a series of capital works in the park.





In February 2006, the Kakadu board and the Director released the park's draft fifth management plan for public comment, following more than 100 consultations with traditional owners at a clan and family group level. Thirty-seven public submissions were received. At the time of writing the board had considered these submissions and amended and approved the final plan. It will be submitted to the Minister for approval in late 2006.

The strong relationship between park staff and members of the Muṯitjulu community in Uluru–Kata Tjuṯa National Park was tested and maintained during several intense periods in mid-2006. During this time there were media allegations of improper and illegal conduct by a former staff member, and then the appointment by the Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations of an administrator to the Muṯitjulu Community Aboriginal Corporation, subsequently contested by members of the community.

Modest celebrations were held at Muṯitjulu in October 2005, and Wreck Bay in December 2005, to mark the 20th and 10th anniversaries of the handing back of title for Uluru–Kata Tjuṯa and Booderee National Parks respectively.

A senior Uluru traditional owner, Barbara Tjikatu, received one of Australia's highest honours, the Order of Australia, in June 2006. Barbara Tjikatu's many colleagues, friends and supporters welcomed this national acknowledgement of her vast and invaluable contribution to the establishment and management of the park.

Visitor management

An estimated 1.4 million visitors appreciated the natural and cultural diversity of Commonwealth reserves in 2005–06, primarily in Booderee, Uluru, Kakadu and the Australian National Botanic Gardens.

We have relied for years on data collected and analysed by Tourism NT for the Northern Territory parks (Kakadu and Uluru). These data have consistently shown high visitor satisfaction at both parks, but the data ceased to be collected in 2005–06. New survey arrangements are being developed and implemented for all our high visitation parks to measure visitor satisfaction.

Remote vehicle monitoring systems are installed in Kakadu, Uluru and Booderee to monitor vehicle movements. Regular surveys help calibrate these data and estimate visitor numbers and use patterns.

Well-attended Stepping Stones for Tourism workshops were sponsored and held on Cocos (Keeling) and Norfolk Islands to educate and encourage local residents and potential enterprises interested in tourism. These workshops are modelled on the successful pilot developed in Kakadu several years ago. A range of new Indigenous tourism businesses started up in Kakadu this year, including the Hawk Dreaming Safari camp, Kakadu Culture Camp, and Murdujul Pty Ltd.

Partnerships and stakeholders

A significant partnership was established with Tourism Australia to collaborate on the development of a concept with the working title of 'National Landscapes'. This exciting initiative is exploring the potential for identifying and branding, under Tourism Australia's Brand Australia, the top 20 to 30 iconic natural tourism experiences in Australia. The concept is well advanced with strong support from national representatives of the tourism industry and a wide range of regional interests.



We continue to foster a variety of partnerships with research institutions. This year they included work with the Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre (as partner); a five-year fire and biodiversity study at Booderee with the Australian National University (through an Australian Research Council linkage grant); a World Heritage Master Class course at Kakadu for 30 students from the European Union, in partnership with Charles Darwin University and the University of Western Sydney; and a range of cooperative work with scientists in the Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Service.

Parks staff participated in a wide range of regional committees, in recognition of the important role parks play in the regional economy. Relevant forums included the South Coast Region Tourism Organisation and the Shoalhaven District Bushfire Management Committee (Booderee), and the National Capital Attractions Association and the National Capital Education Tourism Project (Australian National Botanic Gardens). In Kakadu the close working arrangements with the Northern Territory Bushfires Council continued, and a new partnership between the park, Charles Darwin University and the Jabiru Area School is developing a local education to work programme.

This year volunteers again made invaluable contributions. The Friends of the Australian National Botanic Gardens provided guided walks, organised fund raising events and sponsored training and new infrastructure. Volunteer effort at Uluru was strong and again focused on removal of buffel grass around sacred sites, with great support and leadership from Conservation Volunteers Australia. The initiative and sustained leadership of Chief Ranger Operations Thomas Konieczny in weed control and organising park volunteers was recognised through a Department of the Environment and Heritage Australia Day award.

Close cooperation and collaboration with the New Zealand Department of Conservation (DOC) continued with DOC staff participating in our six-monthly senior management forum. Staff from the Northern Territory and NSW Parks and Wildlife Services contributed respectively to forums in Alice Springs in October and in Thredbo in April.





A steering committee meeting was held in August 2005 in Vanimo PNG for the Tri-National Wetlands Agreement. Under this agreement Kakadu National Park is partnered with Indonesia's Wasur National Park in Irian Jaya, and Tonda Wildlife Management Area in PNG, to share knowledge and on-ground wetlands activities. This year two Kakadu rangers also ran a four-week training course in weed identification and management for local communities in Tonda.

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Business and people management

Many staff were recognised through various awards during the year. A Minister's Award was presented to Garry Linder for his outstanding work in developing and leading Kakadu's crocodile management programme. Australia Day Awards were presented to Wendy Murray (for sustained contribution as Pulu Keeling Conservator since 1995), Thomas Konieczny (for support for joint management and *Anangu* employment at Uluru), Trish Flores (for extraordinary commitment and ability to respond to difficult circumstances) and Peter Wellings (for sustained contribution to park management and relationship building with traditional owners).

Kevin McLeod received a Secretary's Award as a role model and mentor.

Peter Fannin, a botanist, prominent conservationist and long-serving volunteer at Uluru was honoured as the NT Australian of the Year for 2006.

A number of senior staff moved to positions in other organisations during the year. Peter Wellings departed after 25 years experience in Parks Australia and its predecessors, including leading Parks Australia North for seven years. Peter joined the Northern Territory Chief Minister's Department to work on the Territory's Indigenous policy. Anne-Marie Delahunt, a branch head with broad experience in the Department of the Environment and Heritage, was recruited to head Parks Australia North, starting in May 2006. Robin Nielsen, the Director of the Australian National Botanic Gardens for nearly six years, was recruited by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry to work on forestry policy. Philip Stewart was recruited from Charles Darwin University as the new conservator of Christmas Island. Robin and Philip both take up their positions in the new financial year. Philip's predecessor, Alistair Graham, initiated an ambitious and progressive agenda for conservation on the island, and securing resources to implement this is a future challenge.

Many staff occupied temporary positions in other workplaces to help with peak workloads, or to fill critical vacancies. I would like to particularly acknowledge the contributions of John Henderson (from Norfolk) and Marjorie Gant (Booderee) who made terrific contributions at Uluru and Darwin respectively, over many months.



Con Boekel and Peter Coyne from Parks Australia accept the Comcover award for risk management from Stacie Hall, National Manager, Comcover

The financial outcome for the year was pleasing with a modest surplus carried through into cash reserves. This will be used to continue works not completed in 2005–06, largely due to delays in operating expenditure as a result of Cyclone Monica and an associated extended wet season in Kakadu.

As an agency the Director of National Parks continued to benchmark

its performance on reporting and on risk management, winning a second silver award at the Australasian Reporting Awards, and a Comcover Highly Commended Award for risk management by a medium sized agency.

The results of the third year of risk management benchmarking by Comcover were encouraging. Comcover assessed our performance as comprehensive, demonstrating a high level of competency in implementing our enterprise-wide framework. We scored above average on each of five key result areas, compared with all agencies, and with comparable medium sized agencies. Our score resulted in a 7 per cent discount on our insurance premium. As with earlier results, the benchmarking points to areas where improvement is necessary, and training will be a particular focus in 2006–07.

Finally I would like to thank all members of the senior management team in Parks Australia for their commitment and support through the year. Their talent, hard work, and dedication make an enormous difference to the leadership of the agency, our relations with key stakeholders and the overall effectiveness of our efforts.

The coming year

Next year's challenges are not new. We must try to make more headway on reducing weed and feral threats across the terrestrial park estate. We need to continue to improve training and employment opportunities for Indigenous staff, and to maintain and improve visitor facilities and visitor satisfaction. Occupational health and safety of staff and the safety of visitors continue to be major priorities. The development of management plans for new marine protected areas will be a major

task in 2006–07. The outcomes of the Kakadu organisational review will result in greater efficiencies in the park, but will need to be carefully implemented to minimise disruption to the park's operations. The continuing pressures on Christmas Island biodiversity, particularly from weeds and yellow crazy ants, will require specific and continuing attention well into the future. These challenges will require sustained effort, dedication, additional resources, and a clear focus on our goals. I am confident that we are well positioned to meet our challenges and deliver our responsibilities effectively and efficiently.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Peter Cochrane". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "P".

Peter Cochrane

Director of National Parks